

CHRISTMAS 2010

Isaiah 9.2-7, Luke 2.1-10

The Christmas stories told by Matthew and Luke are designed to convey deep truth in symbolic language - the mystery of God becoming a human being. There is factual material in them - Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod, probably just before Herod died in 4BC, and his parents names were Joseph and Mary. Much of the other detail is there to get us to think over and ponder like Mary does after the Shepherds deliver their message about what they had seen and heard. She treasures or is deeply concerned about these things and ponders them in her heart.

By the time Luke and Matthew wrote their Gospels in the late years of the first century much thought had been given to the nature of this Jesus whom people had encountered about 50 years earlier as he taught and healed and challenged the system. He had been crucified and raised from the dead on the third day. His disciples had recognised him initially as God's Son through the resurrection. As they pondered the meaning of all they had seen and heard and touched, they became convinced that Jesus was **always** God's son - so from birth. The stories are written by Luke following Mary's tradition and by Matthew following Joseph's tradition to try and convey this mystery of God taking our flesh and entering our world over to people. So if you are thinking of these stories in terms of journalism these are not stories that claim to be eyewitness accounts

of what happened as it happened from the ABC or Channel 9 correspondent in Jerusalem. They are more like essays written by someone trying to comment on the significance of this man Jesus fifty years after he died because he is still being talked about and his followers are growing in numbers and influence.

So they are written in language which evokes thought and a heart response and are written to people who were finding life tough.

There are levels of meaning which are not always apparent to us but would have been much more obvious when this was written. We have two kings and two kingdoms contrasted in this passage. The first kingdom is earthly, represented by the Emperor Augustus. He won the victory that ended a civil war that he had been fighting as an adult leader for about a decade, but had also been raging off and on for about a century. He therefore commemorated himself on war memorials as the bringer of peace, as saviour, as the son of god (Julius Caesar his father had been deified), and as Lord. All of these are titles that are applied to Jesus in the first two chapters of Luke's gospel. Augustus had achieved his peace by victory in violent conflict - not unlike what we see happening in many parts of the world today - peace for the world through the defeat of Saddam Hussein, peace maintained in the Korean peninsula through threats of violence; peace in the Balkans following violent and genocidal conflict; peace keeping troops in many parts of the world. The other kingdom is the kingdom of God which is inaugurated through vulnerability - the birth of a baby

in physical conditions Australians would find utterly unacceptable; the announcement not through a presidential press conference but by angelic vision to shepherds, a mystery itself because they were hardly the most religious people. In fact they were regarded as sinners by religious folk of the day - they never went to church/synagogue. The parents of the baby are commoners from a small country town close to the eastern margins of the empire. It is a hidden event in the dark of night.

Night or darkness is itself a metaphor for the world's troubles. The Isaiah passage talks about the darkness of violent invasion and how God's actions bring light. Shepherds see light in the angelic vision; the wise men follow a star, visible in the darkness. John tells us that Christ enters the world as the Word made flesh, *in him was life and the life was the light of all people, the light shines in the darkness and is not overwhelmed by darkness.*

Luke's story invites us to ponder and choose this other way. The story invites us to choose to believe in Jesus' as Saviour. The story invites us to let this light enter our gloom, whatever may be gloom in our lives, whether it be our circumstances or something inside our souls and minds that is hidden in the dark.

We can do this in different ways. One prayer I use often starts like this: *Open O doors and bolts of my heart that Christ the king of glory might enter. Enter O my light and enlighten my darkness.* It goes on in similar vein asking Christ to

enter, using a different metaphor each time - Christ as life, Christ as physician, Christ as divine fire, Christ as king. This may work for some of you.

I was given an exercise to do this week which is about pondering the details in the story. One word that appears three times in the story is the word 'manger'. The infant saviour of the world is placed in a manger. The sight of this baby in a manger is the sign that the shepherds are to look for. The exercise that was suggested was, in our imagination, be the manger that receives and holds safely the saviour of the world. Literally this makes no sense but as a metaphor it is awesome - and brings to mind all our holding of babies, in our arms, on our laps and the wonder we felt when ours were born or experience when we see a new born.

Both of these are ways of treasuring the story and pondering it in our heart that Mary's pondering invites us to do. In the quiet times of the service, as you wait for communion, or having received communion or a blessing wait for others to receive, sit with the part of the story that has touched you this year and let its mystery and wonder enter you and bring you what you need - hope, peace, love, joy, new compassion for the world, a new desire to work to end particular abuses or harmful practices, new desire to do your bit, however small to foster God's justice and love in unjust circumstances.